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Navy Medicine research helps to stave virus

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Chief Hospital Corpsman (FMF) Steven Maier of U.S. Navy Environmental and Preventive Medicine Unit No. 2 (NEPMU-2) in Norfolk, Virginia, processes a norovirus sample collected using the new surveillance kit developed by NEPMU2. (Photo by Lt. Chris Coetzer.)

By NMPCHC Public Affairs

The threat of a virus spreading could be the plot right out of a movie, but it's real life and the Navy's Environmental Preventive Medicine Unit Two (NEPMU2) in Norfolk is dealing with those "what-if" scenarios every day. They announced March 12 the development of a norovirus testing kit to help identify Navy-wide outbreaks.

Noroviruses are the most common cause of acute gastroenteritis (AGI) which is inflammation of the stomach and intestines. Cmdr. Cynthia Sikorski, NEPMU2's Threat Assessment Department head, said the low dose required for the virus to produce infection and the ease with which it's transmitted make it extremely contagious.

The testing kit was created by a research team led by Lt. Chris Coetzer, a biochemist, to support the Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center's initiative to better manage the burden of a real-life norovirus outbreak across the fleet and Marine force.

"NEPMU2's innovative sampling technique for norovirus outbreaks will have significant impact in understanding the epidemiology and true burden of the disease, and ultimately enhance prevention efforts," said Sikorski.

While norovirus is usually a mild, self-limiting disease, high morbidity and hospitalization rates are associated with it. The explosiveness of the outbreaks has the potential to significantly affect fleet operational mission capabilities. There are currently no vaccines or medicines that can prevent norovirus infections, which increases the importance of the testing kit.

Approximately 50 percent of all reported AGI outbreaks are caused by norovirus. Symptoms of a norovirus infection may include the rapid-onset of acute vomiting, diarrhea, nausea and abdominal cramps.

Coetzer said those suffering from this illness should drink lots of fluids to prevent dehydration and seek medical attention immediately. He also recommended regular hand

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washing, especially when coming in contact with potential contaminated sources.

"Contaminated surfaces in ship's heads, medical, berthing, or other spaces where people gather may become important sources of new infections," said Coetzer.

"Our personnel encounter real-world problems such as the need to collect specimens of a highly contagious pathogen and find practical solutions to safely and efficiently meet that need," he said. "Whether it is in the field of microbiology, prevention, industrial hygiene, entomology, environmental health, audiology or disease surveillance, NEPMU-2 personnel are always seeking to improve, streamline or simplify the process of accomplishing the mission with an eye toward conserving precious resources. Innovations like the norovirus testing kit support our ultimate goal of providing timely answers and relevant services to the Fleet and Marine Forces."

NEPMU2 and NMCPHC are subordinate commands of Jacksonville, Fla.-based Navy Medicine Support Command.

For more information on norovirus, visit the NEPMU2 website by clicking here.

NEPMU2, NMCPHC and NMSC are part of the Navy Medicine team, a global healthcare network of 63,000 Navy medical personnel around the world who provide high quality health care to more than one million eligible beneficiaries. Navy Medicine personnel deploy with Sailors and Marines worldwide, providing critical mission support aboard ship, in the air, under the sea and on the battlefield.

For more information about infectious disease check out the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Infectious Diseases website by clicking here.

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April 2014 (9)
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February 2014 (7)
January 2014 (7)
December 2013 (7)
November 2013 (12)
October 2013 (7)
September 2013 (14)
August 2013 (13)
July 2013 (11)
June 2013 (22)
May 2013 (15)
April 2013 (14)
March 2013 (14)
February 2013 (14)
January 2013 (12)
December 2012 (11)
November 2012 (11)
October 2012 (7)
September 2012 (9)
August 2012 (12)
July 2012 (13)
June 2012 (17)
May 2012 (22)
April 2012 (14)
March 2012 (13)
February 2012 (14)
January 2012 (13)
December 2011 (13)
November 2011 (20)
October 2011 (22)
September 2011 (12)